Get over the dot-com hangover

Tech 'guru' says business is gripped by indecision

By Geoff Kirbyson

JIM Carroll suggests business owners should pop a few Advils, drink lots of water and get over their dot-com hangover already.

The man who made his mark in the mid-1990s advising people how to drive their business's profitability through the Internet has changed his tune. Sure, he still thinks there are countless opportunities to be had for firms in the wired world, but corporate cultures that used to breed new ideas like rabbits have gone platonic.

"We've gone from irrational exuberance to irrational pessimism," he said in a recent telephone interview from his home office in Mississauga, Ont. "Everybody went to a party in the '90s, they did a lot of dumb things, they bought stocks that were outrageously overvalued, they drank the dot-com Kool-Aid and after it all came crashing down, they woke up and said, 'Oh my God, what did I do?'."

Carroll is one of eight keynote speakers headlining the bill at the Business Connections Trade Show to be held at the Winnipeg Convention Centre on Sept. 30.

Carroll said far too many senior executives and managers are too focused on cost cutting, or "panic cutting" as he calls it, that people with good ideas within an organization don't dare open their mouths.

"We've reached the stage of aggressive indecision. I'm hearing from marketing and advertising agencies that are making proposals to companies that fit a good strategic purpose and the companies are sitting on (the proposals) for six months, a year or two years," he said.

"We need to learn to act aggressively again. We've had an absolute disappearance of the attitude that we can improve our business or discover new opportunities by taking a risk."

Carroll said the corporate equivalent of the deer-caught-in-the-headlights phenomena can't be blamed solely on the dot-com collapse. The ongoing war on terror, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the accounting scandals of 2002 still resonate in the business world.

But once people have shaken out the cobwebs and cured their hangovers, they should chart a course for innovation once again, he said.

"There's so much we can do not just with technology but with product development and the ways we interact with our customers. A lot of the ideas we talked about in the '90s, they weren't bad ideas, it's just the execution was all wrong and greed took over," he said.

Carol-Ann Borody-Siemens, chair of the trade show, now in its third year, called Carroll a guru in the tech field, citing his prediction of the dot-com downfall during the height of Internet mania in the late '90s.

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— Jim Carroll

"He's down to earth and realistic about what the Internet can do (for businesses). He'll tell people they need to make some common-sense decisions how they're going to use the Internet to enhance their business," she said in a recent interview.

Borody-Siemens said much of the day's agenda will centre on the pending privacy act that will come into effect next January, legislation she said will affect "every business in Canada."

"It's an act which determines how we deal with private information, what you can legally collect, how to disseminate it, who can look at it and what recourse your clients have if they don't like how their personal material is being handled," she said.

The trade show itself is geared towards the business to business sector, she noted, and will feature booths that touch on topics such as financial tools, marketing information and insurance.

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Carol-Ann Borody-Siemens chairs the Business Connections Trade Show, Sept. 30.

Other speakers include Mark Chipman, president of Megill-Stephenson Company Ltd. but perhaps best known as the majority owner of the American Hockey League's Manitoba Moose, Chuck Loewen, founder and chief strategy officer for Online Business Systems, Lori Mitchell, director of National Learning & Development and Barbara Bowes, president of Bowes Leadership Group Inc. and a *Free Press* columnist.

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